Four Causes of the Reformation

I recently made a potting bench at home. I found a plan that I liked, cut the boards, and screwed them together to make an outdoor bench that I can use out by the garden. It gives me a nice surface to work on various projects and provides some storage for pots, hoses, and various gardening materials.

If you were to ask, "What made my potting bench?" – why does it exist? What caused it? I could answer in several ways:

1. *Wood* makes the potting bench; it's made out of wood. The material is wood. In fact, it's made of wood that I harvested from my back yard. Without the wood, there would be no potting bench.
2. *A plan* was necessary to make the potting bench; I found a plan that I liked, and I made the bench according to the plan. Without a plan, there would be no potting bench.
3. *I* made the potting bench; I acquired the boards, cut them, and screwed them together. The potting bench exists because of my work. Without me, there would be no potting bench in my back yard.
4. *My desire to have a potting bench* caused the potting bench; the purpose for it is to have a spot to work on potting and garden-related activities. If I did not have a purpose/goal for it, there would be no potting bench in my back yard.

So when describing an event or a project, we can describe the *material* the thing is made from, what *pattern or form* it follows, the *person/agent* who caused it to happen, and/or the *end goal or purpose* for the thing. Any of these would be proper ways of describing the cause of something.

Yesterday was Oct 31, Reformation Day. We commemorate the day back in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the chapel door in Wittenberg, Germany. That event marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation reformed the church and moved it toward a more biblical form of Christianity. Every year about this time, I speak on the importance and influence of the Reformation.

Today I want to describe the causes of the reformation from the four different points of view that I mentioned—what it was made from, the plan that put it into action, the people who caused it, and then it's final goal or achievement.

What caused the Reformation?

I. The biblical doctrine of justification by faith caused the Reformation.

Ideas have consequences. The idea that caused the Reformation was the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. When the reformers recovered the proper definition of justification, it caused the Reformation.

A. Prior to the Reformation, the RCC had been teaching that God's grace allows us to earn merit through our good works. That church taught and still teach that we cooperate with God's grace to earn God's favor. In other words, they taught that we are saved by faith plus works.

B. Martin Luther and others recovered/rediscovered the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone, and that led directly to the Reformation.

One of the primary texts that Luther focused on was …

Romans 1:16–17 *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."*

Rom 3:28 *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.*

Romans 5:1 *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,*

Luther and the other reformers realized that God declares the believing sinner to be righteous based on the righteousness of Christ being imputed/credited to the believer by faith. God sees us as just because of Christ's righteousness, not because of our own good works.

No amount of work we do can earn God's favor. Christ has done everything for us, and we simply receive salvation by faith as a gift.

C. The reformers taught that justification is

1. By grace alone (*sola gratia*) – we do not merit the grace of God; it is purely a gift.

   Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5

   We receive that gift …

2. Through faith alone (*sola fide*)

   a) The NT quotes Hab 2:4—"the just shall live by faith"—three times:

      Romans 1:17 … *the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."*

      Galatians 3:11 *… no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "the just shall live by faith."*

      Hebrews 10:38 *Now the just shall live by faith; …*

   b) Saving faith produces justification. We are declared right with God by faith …

3. In Christ alone (*solus Christus*)

   a) People commonly rely upon their own achievements and accomplishments as the basis of their salvation. People trust in their religious rituals as the means by which they will be saved.

   b) The Reformers recovered the biblical teaching that saving faith is trust in Christ *alone* for the forgiveness of sins.

   c) The Reformers also insisted that Christ is the only mediator and intercessor between God and man.

      1 Timothy 2:5 *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,*

   d) The RCC teaches that other intercessors stand between God and the believer.

      (1) The priest

(2) Mary and the saints

e) We do not believe in a continuing clerical priesthood, and we do not believe that Mary or the departed saints pray for us. We do not pray through them.

f) We have direct access to God through Jesus Christ alone. He is our advocate and intercessor.

Trans: The main thing that needed to be reformed back in the 1500s was the understanding of justification—how is a sinful person made right with a holy God? The reformers rediscovered that it is not through our cooperative efforts but solely by Christ's righteousness being credited to believers by faith.

App: I wonder if you have discovered or recovered the doctrine of justification for yourself? Are you trusting in Christ alone to save you? Are you justified by faith in Christ?

II. *Sola Scriptura* caused the Reformation.

A. The Reformation followed a form or pattern—that the Bible must be the primary authority for faith and practice.

B. *Sola Scriptura* means "Scripture alone," and it's is a way of saying that the Bible is the primary and final source of authority for Christian faith and practice. We believe that because the only inspired, inerrant authority we have is Scripture.

1. We do not believe in apostolic succession. The office and authority of apostleship did *not* continue after the original apostles. There are no apostles today.

2. We do not appeal to the so-called church fathers as our ultimate authority.

3. We do not believe that the church itself or the councils of the church provide the ultimate authority for us.

C. The final authority is vested in the Word of God alone, not in a certain person or in a group of people.

John 17:17; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21; Heb 1:1

Scripture provides our authority for faith and practice.

D. At the time of the Reformation, the RCC was teaching that authority for the church comes from *both* the Bible *and* from church tradition. In reality, they taught that the church is the custodian of the Bible and that only it has the right to interpret and teach the Bible.

E. The church developed various doctrines over the centuries. Some of these doctrines are not based on the Bible. But they still have authority because the church gives them authority. That idea—that the church itself is the primary authority—led to many abuses and corruptions that the reformers sought to change.

F. The Reformers came to believe that the only source of genuine, inspired authority must be God's Word. The RCC is *not* the final authority; the pope is not the authority; the bishops, archbishops, and cardinals are not the authority. The word of God is. Someone claiming apostolic authority is not the final authority; the Bible is.

Luther famously stated, "I am bound by the Scriptures … and my conscience is captive to the Word of God."

G. So if the Bible is the final authority, then the church is obligated to follow what God has revealed in Scripture and reject any traditions or practices that the Bible does not require.

H. The Reformers quickly concluded that the church of their era was *not* following the Bible very closely. In fact, many things about the church had no connection to the Bible whatsoever. E.g.,

1. Prayer to Mary and the saints
2. Purgatory
3. Indulgences
4. The sale of church offices
5. The use of relics and images

I. The Reformers saw all such unbiblical practices and beliefs as corruptions. They insisted that the church should conform to the Bible, not the Bible to the church. So they were committed to restoring the church to a more biblical set of beliefs and practices.

J. That commitment led to the Reformation. The cause of the Reformation was a commitment to *Sola Scriptura.*

Trans: That is a commitment we still retain today. The Bible is the primary authority for faith and practice. We must insure that the church follows the standards recorded for us in the Bible, and primarily in the NT.

III. The reformers caused the Reformation.

A. Men who understood what the Bible teaches about justification led a movement that reformed the church. The reformers caused the Reformation.

B. The Bible encourages us to follow authorized, ordained, godly leaders.

1Co 11:1 *Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.*

Php 4:9 *Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.*

2Ti 2:2 *And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.*

Heb 13:7 *Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, …*

The church reformed because of godly leaders who worked to reform the church.

C. On Reformation Day, over the last couple of decades, we've looked at most of the primary reformers, such as…

1. John Wycliffe—the "Morning Star" of the Reformation and one of the earliest translators of the Bible into the English language

2. Jan Hus—taught Reformation principles in Bohemia very early on

3. Martin Luther—nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the chapel in Wittenberg, thus launching the Protestant Reformation

4. John Calvin—applied Reformation principles to the church in Geneva, Switzerland, and had a huge influence on succeeding generations

5. Huldrich Zwingli—led the Reformation in Zurich, Switzerland, through his expositional preaching

6. John Knox—promoted the Reformation in Scotland

7. William Tyndale—promoted Reformation doctrines in England and produced one of the most influential translations of the Bible

These men and many others led millions of people to embrace what we think of today as Protestant, evangelical Christian doctrines and practices. Churches like ours owe a great debt of gratitude to the reformers. If they had not reformed the church, we would all still be mired in Roman Catholic errors, corruptions, and abuses.

These reformers caused the Reformation.

App: And we need solid, godly leaders to continue to provide leadership to the church. Christian leaders today must continually lead the church back to biblical standards, doctrines, and expectations.

IV. The desire to reform the church caused the Reformation.

A. The final cause or end goal of the Reformation was a more biblical church. The reformers wanted to align the church more closely to biblical teaching.

B. The church ought to be biblical. Whatever we do as a church should align with biblical teaching/sound doctrine. If the Bible is our ultimate standard, then we must insure that the church is operating biblically.

C. Sadly, the RCC in the middle ages was far from biblical. Corruption and chaos were common. Several examples:

1. Powerful people bought and sold church offices. People enjoyed the salaries from offices but often did none of the work.

2. Many priests lived in open sin or kept mistresses.

3. The church sold indulgences. Many people saw these certificates as a license to sin without consequence. I've mentioned before the story of Johann Tetzel and how Luther reacted against the sale of indulgences…
4. The priests, some of whom were illiterate and very immoral, often neglected the people of the church.
5. The collection of relics—like bits of the cross and bones of the saints—was very popular. A single viewing of the 5005 relics owned by Frederick of Saxony was supposed to reduce one's time in purgatory by 2M years. (Cairns)

The church of the middle ages was exceedingly corrupt in many ways.

D. The Reformation was a "back to the Bible" movement. It sought to rid the church of unbiblical doctrines, practices, and corruptions.

E. The Reformation was never perfect, but it was successful in reforming the church, to greater and lesser degrees.

F. The Reformation led to the translation of the Bible into the common languages of the people throughout Europe.

1. Wycliffe and Tyndale translated the Bible into English.
2. Luther translated the Bible into German.
3. Other reformers did the same in their languages.

G. The Reformation led to a reform in the administration of the church.

1. The reformers taught that Christ is the head of the church, not the pope. The pope is not the Vicar of Christ or the successor of Peter. Many of the reformers thought of the pope as the Antichrist.
2. Some of the Reformers wanted to abandon the Episcopal form of church government which was ruled from the top down. They moved the church to a more congregational form of church government, where the congregation rules itself.

H. The Reformers recognized that the worship practices/liturgy of the church needed to be changed.

1. The congregation needed to be more involved, not be mere spectators watching and listening to the priests.

2. The service should be in the language of the people, not in Latin if they could not understand it.

3. Reformed worship focused on the preaching of the Word. Expositional, verse-by-verse preaching became central in Reformed churches because the people need to know what the Bible says, what it means, and what we ought to do about it.

   The average church goer at that time knew very little about the Bible. The religious leaders of that time were teaching more about church traditions than about the Bible.

4. The format of our worship services today is directly linked to the Reformers. They saw that the worship service should contain only those elements that we find in the Bible—things like reading the Word, preaching the Word, prayer, singing hymns, giving our offerings, and the Lord's Supper. True worship occurs as we hear the Word and respond to it.

I. Some churches were more thorough in reforming than others were.

   1. Some churches, like the Lutherans, reformed just enough to remove the most unbiblical things from the church. Lutherans retain many of the traditional practices and beliefs from RCism.

      Some would say that traditional Lutheran worship is very similar to RC worship. That's true; Lutherans reformed minimally.

   2. Other churches, such as Presbyterians, reformed more thoroughly. They recovered a more biblical pattern for their churches and removed more of the objectionable elements that had crept into the church. But they kept some unbiblical ideas and practices—e.g., baby baptism.

3. Still other churches, such as the Baptists, went even further in reforming their churches. Baptists removed even long-standing traditions like baby baptism that have no basis in the Bible. Churches like ours strive to conform our practice to the biblical pattern as much as possible.

If someone were to ask what caused the Reformation, we could respond in four ways.

1. The biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone caused the Reformation.
2. A commitment to *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone as the source of faith and practice – caused the Reformation.
3. The work of the reformers caused the Reformation. A small group of motivated men like Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, and Calvin made it happen.
4. The desire for church reform caused the Reformation. The reformers' end goal or purpose was to return the church to a more biblical position, and they largely achieved their goal.

We have not discussed one other cause of the Reformation, and that cause is God. God was the *ultimate* or *providential* cause of the Reformation. We believe that God caused all of these other causes to come together in order to bring the church back to a more biblical form. Any true revival is caused by God, and the Reformation was probably the greatest of all revivals.

As we commemorate Reformation Day, we should be very grateful for the men who rediscovered the great ideas of justification by faith and *sola scriptura*.

One of the mottos of the Reformation was *semper reformanda* – "always reforming." And that's what every generation has to do—continue the work of reforming the church to make sure that she is following the biblical pattern.